

Did Broken Romance or Patriotism Send Italian Duke to Africa?



THE DUKE OF THE ABRUZZI reviewing native troops upon his arrival in Italian Somaliland in Eastern Africa



MISS KATHERINE ELKINS at the time her engagement to the Duke of the Abruzzi was reported

By Arnold Prince

THESE were many who sighed regretfully and said "Poor fellow!" when they read the other day that the Duke of the Abruzzi had taken up his abode in Italian Somaliland and might possibly devote the remainder of his life to the agricultural development of that colony. In the homes in the United States, Italy, France, Great Britain, Spain, where the incidents of his "international" wooing were remembered the emotionally inclined shook their heads and murmured:

"Away off in that terrible part of Africa! Just imagine! Too bad!"

And yet the duke is not exactly the person one would pick offhand for an object of pity. Born the son of a king, a prince in his own right, a gallant soldier, heir to a great estate, comparatively young, good looking, and with a picturesque background of daring and skillful exploring and mountain climbing, he would seem to be blessed beyond most men.

Widespread Interest

But what the emotionally disposed were referring to, of course, when they shook their heads and sighed "Too bad!" was their own interpretation of the outcome of the duke's courtship of the former Miss Katherine Elkins, of West Virginia, an affair which in its various stages engaged the attention of the Pope, the King of Italy, the King of England, the King of Spain and nobles, statesmen and the reading public everywhere.

Twelve years have elapsed since that most extraordinary of world romances began its narrative of rumor, counter rumor and denial; transatlantic voyages, royal trepidations, high hopes, fond aspirations and "broken" anticipations, and still the public refuses to forget. It is one of the most remarkable instances on record of the persistence of popular sentimental inclinations. Solemn, semi-official assurances from the Quirinal at Rome that there was no basis for the general view taken of the Abruzzi-Elkins attachment, combined with news dispatches from the Eternal City and Venice that the young nobleman was now infatuated with two other women, being so much in love with both that he could not decide on either, failed to convince any one, and the people went on believing as they had before.

Story Gets a Fresh Start

Now, more than a decade after the inception of the romance, the fires have broken out afresh.

Why else would a prince of the House of Savoy forsake the fair halls of his ancestral estate and bury himself among the blacks of the African littoral, where only hardships and a burning sun await him?

It would be humorous if one could get rid of the vague uneasiness that it might also be tragic. However gratifying to the sentimental on-looker may be the spectacle of the unsuccessful suitor rushing off to shoot big game in an alien land, there is always the possibility that the young man himself may be unhappy. It is one of those situations which appeal to the risibilities of all but the victim.

The public's dogged refusal to give up its pet theory concerning the duke would touch the funny-bone, but for certain baffling features which, as in the initial stages of his courtship, becloud the entire situation with uncertainty.

After all, it is a fact that the duke has abandoned the attractions of Venice for the blistering wastes of Somaliland, and it is also true that, unlike the former Miss Elkins,

THE DUKE OF THE ABRUZZI, who has "buried" himself in Italian Somaliland

who is now happily wed to William F. R. (Billy) Hitt, he has never married.

As in the beginning of this mysterious affair, the smile is constantly being checked by the sigh. And instead of the prince riding off and leaving the poor little girl, as in the tales of old, here, if the public version be true, we have a case of the prince himself going into mourning long after the girl of his choice had found happiness in the love of another man.

Another Explanation

Of course, there is another possible side to this picture, although the public refuses to consider it. The duke, during the war, was Admiral Commander in Chief of the Italian navy. As such he made certain recommendations which, he contended, would serve to hasten the end of the war. One of these recommendations was that an attack be made by land and sea on that part of the Dalmatian coast which lies north of Cattaro, as a means of cutting off the Austrians from their base, but as the plan called for an employment of from 60,000 to 100,000 soldiers, General Cadorna, of the Italian forces, refused to sanction it.

The duke took the refusal much to heart, and, from reports, offered his resignation to the King, who would not accept it. Afterward the Admiral came in for criticism when certain units of the Austrian naval forces eluded his vigilance, or were said to have eluded it, and this increased his dissatisfaction. He finally induced the King to relieve him of his command, and very little was heard of him by the public for some time after that.

It is admitted in some quarters that his disappointment over his treatment in the war might have had something to do with his decision to go to Somaliland, but this view finds very little support among those who insist on investing his act with a sentimental significance and who hold tenaciously to the belief that his unforgetting devotion to his American sweetheart was what prompted it. The suggestion that the duke really saw a new opportunity for serving his country by bringing into productivity an important part of its African territory which up to the present has been largely barren, is as generally scoffed at as the other.

Started Back in 1908

It was in March, 1908, when gossip first connected the names of the Duke of the Abruzzi and the former Miss Elkins.

Prince Luigi Amadeo of Savoy, to give him his other title, had for several years before that held a distinguished place in public esteem as a young man of courage, an explorer and a mountain climber. Born in Madrid in 1873, in the last year of his father's reign as the King of Spain, he became known, even as a boy, as a born mountain climber.

At the age of twenty-one he scaled the Matterhorn, and soon afterward made a cruise around the world for his government as a lieutenant aboard the warship Cristoforo Colombo. While on this cruise he made his first visit to the United States, returning in 1897 to carry out his ambition to climb Mount St. Elias in Alaska. In this he was successful, attaining the 18,000 foot level after a series of experiences which attracted world-wide attention. He was the first man to reach the summit of this mountain.

For two years after that the duke devoted himself to studying the



THE DUCHESS OF AOSTA, sister-in-law of the Duke of the Abruzzi, who opposed his marriage to Katherine Elkins

North Pole problem. This was, of course, long before the roof of the world had felt the foot of any explorer, and there was intense interest in the Italian nobleman's preparations. His plans completed, he embarked from Christiania on June 12, 1899, in the Stella Polaris, and forced his way to within 241 miles of the pole, or further north than any explorer before him. His record of "furthest north" remained unchallenged until 1906, when the late Admiral Peary won the honor by approaching within 202 miles of the pole.

Still Hungered for Adventure

Any ordinary young man would have been satisfied with all these accomplishments, but the duke's love of adventure was not so easily appeased, and after having written an excellent book on his polar explorations, he undertook the problem of scaling the Mountains of the Moon.

This famous range is in Africa, and was known to Ptolemy, but had never been conquered by any white man before the Duke of the Abruzzi. In fact, for years their existence was thought to be a myth. The duke solved the mystery by climbing sixteen of the mountains and bringing back an exact record of their location and height.

This, then, was the young man who came overseas to woo the fair American.

Statements as to the first meeting between the two have been generally conflicting, but it took place some time in 1907, in this country, after the duke had made his third visit to the United States as the representative of his country at the Jamestown Exposition.

In March, 1908, Miss Elkins, her father, the late Senator Stephen B. Elkins, and her mother were stopping at a hotel in Florida, and tongues began to wag when a distinguished looking foreigner, registered at the same hostelry as Ludovico Sarto, was discovered to be no less a personage than the famous young Duke of the Abruzzi.

Followed Her to Baltimore

When a few days later the Elkins family returned to Baltimore accompanied by the duke, the gossip became general, and when a short time afterward the young man started back for Italy it was openly stated in the newspapers that his mission was to ask the consent of the King and Queen of Italy to his marriage to Miss Elkins.

Twelve years have gone by since

MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM F. R. HITT. Mrs. Hitt was formerly Miss Katherine Elkins

the young Italian, followed by the good wishes of most Americans, undertook his cross-seas journey, but up to the present no satisfactory official explanation of what happened to prevent the match has been forthcoming. That the young man was in love with Miss Elkins, and that she in some degree reciprocated his feelings never was disputed.

Some blamed Queen Dowager Margherita of Italy for the collapse of the romance, and others Senator Elkins, the young woman's father, who was said to be irrevocably averse to the marriage unless all the rights of a royal consort were accorded to Miss Elkins. The idea of her becoming a morganatic wife was firmly opposed by him.

As the international negotiations and exchange of cable messages continued it developed that the King and Queen of Italy were inclined to listen with favor to the young duke's pleas, but that the Duchess of Aosta, wife of the duke's eldest brother, sided with the Queen Dowager.

Then ensued a period of years when no day seemed complete which did not produce some new angle of the international romance.

Denied by the Senator

Originally it had been rumored that the marriage would take place some time in October, 1908, and the first official announcement to the contrary was made by Senator Elkins in August of that year, when he told newspaper men at the Belmont Hotel in New York that the report was "absolutely without foundation."

Soon afterward, however, the Princess Letitia, stepmother of the duke, was said to have confirmed the betrothal between the duke and Miss Elkins, and the gossip began all over again. This time it was reported from Italy that the marriage was to take place some time in November, and many details were provided in connection with the event. The King, it was said, was to give the bride a diamond tiara worth \$120,000; Senator Elkins was to be invested with the collar of the Annunziata, worn only by the adult relatives of the King; several battleships were to escort the duke to America for his mar-



DOWAGER QUEEN MARGHERITA of Italy, who was strongly opposed to the Duke's marriage to Miss Elkins

riage; the President of the Italian Senate, as officer of the State and notary of the Crown, had been designated as the one to transcribe the act of marriage in the registry of the royal household.

As these reports, invested with circumstances of apparent authority, came from Rome, they were accepted as truth by many persons in spite of the equally definite assertions from other quarters that the engagement, if it ever existed, was all off.

Public Was for the Duke

The duke all this time had the sympathy of all those who "love a lover," and seemed to be making every effort to overcome the obstacles at the Italian court. He and his two brothers, the Duke of Aosta and the Count of Turin, were said to have had several conferences with King Victor Emmanuel at the palace in Rome on the subject of the proposed marriage, but without making any known progress toward the hoped for event.

THE DUKE OF THE ABRUZZI in the uniform of an officer of the Italian Navy

Miss Elkins in anticipation of her marriage and that as a next step arrangements were well under way for her to become a member of the Catholic Church.

Miss Elkins and her mother were then reported to be at Nauheim, Hesse, Germany, and the duke intended to join her there, it was said, as soon as he returned from a trip to the Himalayas.

Back From the Himalayas

The next month the duke returned from the Himalayas, but did not go to Germany, or to the house of the Countess Granard in England, where it was next rumored the engagement would be renewed. Instead, he went to Marseilles, and from there to Rome, where, it was said, he had another conference at Riconigli Palace with the King and the Queen.

The next heard of the duke was in the shape of a report that he had gone secretly to Switzerland to meet his American sweetheart, and once again the usual announcements were forthcoming, first, that the marriage positively would take place, and, second, that it positively would not.

Meantime, a new crop of reports of an entirely different nature began to reach the United States from abroad. Miss Elkins, whose every step was chronicled by reporters, made a visit to Paris, and mention was made of the fact that one Billy Hitt was frequently seen in her company.

Inquiry as to who Billy Hitt might be disclosed the fact that he was William F. R. Hitt, son of the late Representative R. R. Hitt, of Illinois, once a power on the Republican side of the House in Washington.

Billy Hitt, it seemed, had been

devoted to Miss Elkins for several years, having been an admirer even before the advent of the duke, and it had even been rumored at one time that they were engaged. This rumor was effectively laid with the appearance of the duke, but as the possibility of the latter's marriage to Miss Elkins became more and more remote, increasingly frequent mention was made of the presence in the young woman's company of the persistent Billy.

Billy on the Job

Whenever Miss Elkins went shopping in Paris or elsewhere on the Continent it was duly observed that the faithful Billy was not far off, and when the Elkins family returned to New York in October, 1911, William F. R. Hitt was aboard the same steamship.

Some of the tenacious adherents to the duke's cause still continued to predict from time to time that the "marriage would take place yet," and occasional advices from overseas stated the "royal opposition was fast disappearing," but on October 27, 1913, further conjectures in this direction were abruptly terminated by the marriage of Miss Elkins and Billy Hitt at Elkins, W. Va.

For all the devotion displayed by the young man, the marriage was a complete surprise, and even the nearest relatives of the couple, including the mother of the bride, did not know of the impending ceremony, it was said, until a few hours before it was performed.

The marriage was performed in the afternoon in the main hall of Halleyhurst, the Elkins country place, in the presence of the immediate members of the two families only. The ceremony was informal, and Mr. Hitt's mother, who was not present, learned of it by telegraph.

End of the Romance

This ended the Elkins-Abruzzi romance, five years after its inception, but did not entirely destroy public interest in the duke. He was heard of from time to time through his activities in the war, and when he suffered his second disappointment by having his advice ignored as admiral of the navy the sympathy that went out to him was intensified by his failure to marry the girl of his choice.

In November, 1919, it was announced that he had gone to the Italian Somaliland in the hope of discovering the source of the Wehi Shebel River, known as the "River of Leopards," and after that came the news that he had decided to remain in Somaliland and develop its agricultural resources.

That the task undertaken by the duke is far from an easy one and may very well occupy him for the rest of his life is admitted by every one who has the least acquaintance with the country.

Italian Somaliland is a narrow strip of the northeastern coast of Africa, bordered on the west by Abyssinia. Its open plains are covered for the most part with coarse grasses, with here and there dense tracts of jungle land. Its natives are glistering blacks, who come of a fighting race and generally go about armed with spears, and its climate ranges from intense dry heat to days of suffocating humidity.